

Anjali Deshmukh

India, U.S.
merge in
artist's vision

By ANGUS McDONALD



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with the painting.


Deshmukh was born in Washington, D.C. and raised in Bethesda, Maryland, but India has always loomed large in her life. Her parents are from Maharashtra, and Marathi was the lingua franca in the family home until she was about five; then she switched to English. She majored in English and fine arts at Amherst College, Massachusetts, and a brief spell in journalism followed.

Her career morphed through a stint at Rhode Island School of Design, which allowed her deep consciousness of India to emerge on canvas. A Fulbright Scholarship brought her to Delhi in November 2005 for her first extended stay.

"My artwork has always had some connection to India, because of my upbringing and because I care about India," says Deshmukh.

Yet her art contrasts sharply with the formalist works that currently dominate New Delhi's art scene. As a product of American schools, Deshmukh says she comes from a different tradition. Political and social concern, perhaps heightened by her perspective as an outsider, are primary to her work.

Her environmental engagement came about when she began painting landscapes, about a year before she arrived in India. Subjects included the story of Shiva as a pillar of fire, which was compared to a volcanic eruption and used as an allegory of global warming brought about by natural phenomena. The current series is a continuation of those themes, but with more emphasis on the human causes of environmental problems.

Deshmukh hasn't made a firm decision on her future. She may return to a writing career in the United States, or come back to India and live here as a Person of Indian Origin, with the option to take citizenship. The current boom in the art market would certainly work in her favor. One plan she discusses is founding an organization to address some of the social and environmental concerns she has been exploring through her work. 

Angus McDonald, a freelance writer and photographer who has lived in India since 1998 is also currently documenting projects of the Ambassador's Fund for Cultural Preservation.

and environmental issues," says Deshmukh. She started the series in America but developed it extensively over the last year in India, supported by a Fulbright Scholarship. www.fulbright-india.org

Take the Saraswati River as an example. The invisible third river which joins the Ganga and the Yamuna at Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, is a sacred entity to some, a possible historical fact to others, a real river which either dried up or moved underground in ancient times. Travel to different parts of northern India, and you will encounter different versions of the Saraswati, remodelled according to local geography.

Likewise, Deshmukh has her own consciousness of the river. Her mother being a Sanskrit scholar, Deshmukh grew up surrounded by Hindu mythology. But she also uses the river as a metaphor. In her painting of the *sangam*, the confluence where the three rivers meet, the Ganga and the Yamuna are stylized but recognizably aqueous, cool and blue. The Saraswati, bisecting the Y of the rivers, is a series of densely green ponds, representing the story of the river rising from seven lakes. The simple composition captures both the ritual purity of the confluence and its present pollution. The catastrophic environmental degradation, says Deshmukh, was the thing she found most striking when she visited the site.

Lightening the subject with a touch of humor and a ray of hope, the green ponds also refer to the use of duckweed to absorb nitrogen pollution in waterways.

In another canvas, the third river becomes a different metaphor altogether. A thin white line snakes across a desiccated landscape, originating in a delicate veil of green which holds tenuously to a corner of the arid territory. The landscape represents a stretch of desert near Jaisalmer in Rajasthan. The river has now become the border between India and Pakistan, an arbitrary line drawn in sand, yet a line with all the real world power of a religious story. On either side of the line, communities are sinking tubewells, depleting the water table without any sense of coordination—affecting each other's future because of a line intended to separate them.

Deshmukh switches on her computer and shows a parallel work, a reflection of the image using computer graphics where blocks of yellow text mirror the fragile greenery where the river rises. These are three stories of the water crisis, each with a different outcome. They reflect her extensive reading and writing on the subject, a process which she interweaves with the painting, often sitting up till 4 a.m. sifting articles she has found on the Internet. The computer image will eventually be shown side by side

Marathi-speaking Anjali Deshmukh, born and raised in suburban America, but happily painting, designing and writing in a minimally furnished South Delhi apartment, is the last person you would accuse of having an identity crisis.

Ask her if she considers herself American or Indian and the 27-year-old replies in a stream of rapid fire, highly articulate English that she is, in effect, both. Look over the canvases on the walls and you'll see what she means. Strikingly modern, almost abstract landscapes combine influences from NASA satellite imagery to Hindu mythology to dense scientific papers trawled from the Internet. On a gleaming Macintosh laptop, the artist designs companion pieces to ultimately accompany the canvases, creating a dialogue and providing, in some measure, an explanation of the work.

Deshmukh exhibited 20 paintings and digital drawings at a show called "Agent Green of the Acacia Tortilis and Other Weapons" at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, in December 2006.

"The work began as an examination of how the intersection between mythology and science could reflect on social